SOC4.01.4 Tupamaros

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Tupamaros Before The Fall

By Lewis H. Diuguid

The Tupamaros guerillas achieved what no Uruguayans before them could do—they caught the attention of outsiders. These revolutionaries with a flair for drama not only attracted Greek emigre Constantin Costa-Gavras but a less-known Swedish film-maker, Jan Lindqvist whose "Tupamaros" opens today at the Cerberus 3.

Lindqvist's selling of the Tupamaros seems more honest than Costa-Gavras' "State of Siege" because it comes clearly labeled as a joint production with the Tupamaros themselves. "State of Siege" presents as truth an interpretation at least as biased.

Greater honesty in this case makes for less theater. "Tupamaros" doubtless will be a long hour for Americans accustomed to a shock a minute for their money. But to a journalist who worked in Uruguay at the task of piecing together the Tupamaro story, the film is often remarkable.

A kidnaped British diplomat, whom all of Uruguay's troops could not find, is shown talking at ease in Cell 6 of "The People's Prison." A Tupamaro outlined against the movement's flag, cogently argues why these middle-class rebels "are indestructable" and must impose their vision of socialism on what was once a tranquil land. Officials of the government explain how they justify repression of Tupa sympathizers, — and sometimes innocent victims of that repression who dare to speak out, too.

Not much of this was easy to catch by ear, let alone on camera. While the Tupamaros have a proven sense for public relations, their lives depended on not exercising it in public.

The one jarring addition to an otherwise straightforward presentation is the English-language narrator's voice, assigned to fill in the background between the interviews (which are in Spanish with subtitles).

This voice deadpans about students being gunned down by police in the streets of Montevideo—"Uruguay is converted into a giant torture chamber"—in the same facile manner that Costra-Gavras uses to convert a U.S. AID adviser into a maimer of prisoners.

As the film was being completed last year, the Uruguayan armed forces awoke from their long sleep and virtually destroyed the Tupamaros. It is still not clear why what looked like invincible elan and organization have collapsed.

Some of the cells relaxed their guard. One "safehouse" was surprised intent on a bull roast. In at least a few cases, common citizens whom the Tupamaros claim to represent appear to have turned them in.

It is probable that the idealistic, ideological entonings of the Tupa in the film are already anachronistic, and that their stated goal of coming to power will not be met. But a less ambitious stage is already reached—the military has been provoked into taking power.

It is not yet an absolute dictatorship, which the Tupamaros thought would win them converts among repressed citizens. But that, too, may come.

Uruguay, with a population of under 3 million, has lost one major distinction, its democratic government on a continent prone to coups and dictators. Nobody paid much attention to Uruguay in those days, and the citizenry will consider that, in their judgment of the Tupamaros.